



1998 LEGISLATIVE REPORT



Dear Friends:

*Another fast, intense, 60-day session is behind us. Unfortunately, the 1998 Legislature will be remembered for what was **NOT** accomplished! Nothing was done to feed hungry children, expand health care for the underprivileged, reduce class sizes, create more decent-paying jobs, or help families keep more of their income.*

A major disappointment is the lack of a Transportation Budget. The

Legislature completely shied away from its responsibility of addressing the most critical and complex transportation needs in our state's history. Since majority legislators were unable to get final approval for their "bond" transportation plan, they voted to give the final decision to the voters in the form of a referendum — a legislative act that will appear on the ballot in November.

Although many needs went unmet, we did approve a few good pieces of legislation that will have positive effects on our families and neighborhoods. The following review provides a few brief details. If you would like more information on these or any other bills, please contact my office in Olympia. As always, your comments and concerns are welcomed and appreciated.

Sincerely,

Margarita

Senator Margarita Prentice

Olympia Address:
419 JAC Building
PO Box 40482
Olympia, WA 98504

Direct line:
(360) 786-7616
Legislative Hotline:
1-800-562-6000

EDUCATION

\$25 million was requested for local school districts to offer more learning opportunities for students needing extra help to meet Washington's new higher academic standards. However, only \$8 million was provided for reading tutoring in grades K-6 during the school day, school vacations, or during the summer. No money was allotted for before- or after-school or Saturday tutoring. Another \$9 million was provided to teach kindergarten and first- and second-grade teachers how to teach phonics. Training in the use of other tools to teach reading was not provided.

SALMON RECOVERY

The Legislature authorized \$31 million for salmon habitat projects such as culvert removal, large woody debris, and other in-stream improvements. Framework encouraging participation of local interests in developing regional salmon recovery and habitat projects also passed. More control has been given to the local level in deciding how water is used or conserved, and \$5 million will assist local units to begin watershed planning.



COMMUNITIES

The Legislature spent a great deal of time working to ensure safer neighborhoods. That included making our laws against drunk driving more strict. **Starting next January 1, a driver will be considered legally drunk if his/her blood-alcohol content (BAC) level is .08.** Currently, the legal level is .10.

Also under the new DUI laws, a judge can suspend a first-time offender's license for 90 days. DUI convictions will stay on a driver's record for seven years instead of just five. And repeat offenders will be required to install ignition interlock devices on their cars. In a related move, the Legislature also made it illegal for an intoxicated person to buy alcohol. Before it only applied to the seller of the alcohol.

In response to the stabbing death of a man outside the Kingdome last year by a mentally ill person who had recently been released from jail, the Legislature decided to allow judges to confine someone with a history of violent mental illness ***before*** they commit a crime. Other new laws provide for the sharing of information on mentally ill offenders, and improving communications between group homes and communities.

HEALTH CARE

\$11 million allotted in the budget will allow approximately 7,000 low-income families to purchase health care insurance through the Basic Health Plan (BHP). This is only a catch-up maneuver to include those who should have been covered last year. The good news is the waiting list for BHP gets shorter every month. For more information and an application, call toll-free: **1-800-826-2444**.

LEGISLATIVE REPORT



Gov. Locke's signature on my Temporary Worker Housing Bill was the culmination of years of negotiations.

HOUSING

It was gratifying to have the support and leadership of the Governor on the Temporary Worker Housing bill. This legislation was the result of literally years of negotiations among farmworkers, growers, and lawmakers. The Governor's signature on the bill means that agricultural employers across the state can provide housing for their temporary workers under a more sensible Temporary Worker Housing Building Code.

We also made progress for tenants and owners of mobile home parks. A bill we approved this year says that mobile home park owners cannot be forced to hook up to a sewer system when the existing septic system still meets local health department standards. This will be a significant savings to both owners and tenants.

HIGHER EDUCATION

One of the few positive notes for higher education was the allocation of start-up funds for the state's **Pre-paid College Tuition** program, which we created last year. This will help families get ahead on the planning of their children's future education by allowing them to buy tuition for tomorrow's education at today's prices. Pre-paid tuition can be used at any of Washington's colleges or universities, public or private, and at many schools outside Washington, as well.

The Higher Education Coordinating Board is setting up the office and sales will begin later this summer. Watch for a major media blitz as soon as details have been finalized. In the meantime, the Higher Education Coordinating Board number in Olympia is **(360) 753-7800**.

LEGISLATIVE REPORT

TRANSPORTATION



The Puget Sound region has the second-fastest growing economy in the nation. Our state's transportation system, however, is not keeping up. Compared with the rest of the state, transportation problems are worse in our area (the 11th District) than anywhere else. Three airports, a train station, the Port of Seattle docks, and the freight-mobility demands of PACCAR, Boeing, and hundreds of smaller companies stretch our roadways to maximum capacity every day. Right now, the Port of Seattle is 24 hours closer to Japan than California ports. That's a critical competitive advantage for us. But

if travel time to the Seattle waterfront doesn't maintain or improve, our geographical advantage will soon be lost. Federal budget cuts have cost our state \$340 million in interstate highway funds. It is estimated that \$60 billion is needed to make our roadways capable of adequately handling commercial and private traffic.

Two plans to deal with this problem were presented to the Legislature. **The pay-as-you-go plan supported by the Governor** would have raised the gas tax by five cents, and then indexed it to inflation thereafter, so that it keeps pace with the increasing costs of roadway maintenance and upgrading. Under his plan, a person driving the western U.S. average of 12,000 miles per year, getting 20 miles to the gallon, would have paid \$30 more a year. Maintaining and building our roadways would have been paid for by those who use them — visitor or resident — the way they always have been. The tax would have provided continuous funding, growing along with the population and transportation needs. The state constitution specifies that gas tax revenues are spent on roads and ferries only.

But the second plan — the one adopted by the Legislature — would sell \$1.9 billion worth of bonds to be repaid over 25 years out of the **state's general fund**. Along with interest, however, the total bill paid by our children and grandchildren would come to about \$5 billion. It would be by far the largest debt authorization in the history of our state.

I am greatly concerned about this shift of money from the general fund, because that fund is what pays for the state's share of public schools, public safety, and social services. At the same time, this plan would reduce drivers' **Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (license tabs)** by \$30 and shift criminal justice funding of counties and cities from the **MVET** source to the **general fund**.

I voted against this plan in the Senate because of the shifting of funds away from the general fund, and also because it does not represent a long-range vision of our state's transportation and economic needs. I know we could have done better.

But, as passed by the Legislature, it is not subject to the Governor's signature or veto, and instead will be on the November ballot.

INTERIM PROJECTS

➤ **CHRONIC PAIN RELIEF:** The Chronic Pain Management Bill protects from oversight agencies physicians who choose to prescribe a narcotic for a patient suffering from chronic pain. True chronic pain sufferers do not become addicted and should have the benefit of scientific advances in narcotic pain relief.

➤ **MOBILE HOME OWNERS:** Work will continue to improve proposed legislation to protect this vulnerable group of home owners. I have experienced some of their unique concerns first-hand when I stay in my motor home parked in a mobile home park in Olympia during the legislative session.

➤ **GAMBLING:** The 1997 Legislature allowed enhanced cardrooms, or so called "mini-casinos." This is a very ambiguous expansion of gambling in our state. The Legislature has committed to form a group to examine the extent of gambling activities in our state, the effect on the economy, the rate of addictive gambling, and past legislative/congressional intent. This issue is important enough that we need to examine it in a very comprehensive way.

➤ **CREDIT UNIONS:** Many of our 11th District constituents belong to a credit union. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling and a bill making its way through Congress could affect members here in our state. The Court ruled credit union membership must be restricted to a single common occupation, organization, etc. A bill to counteract this ruling has passed the U.S. House. My fellow Financial Institutions Committee members and I will be meeting with the Department of Financial Institutions to discuss potential results of either action. Consumer choice of financial institutions must be protected.

PAGES

It is always a pleasure to sponsor hometown students as Senate pages. Pictured are three from the Renton area: **Sarah Leonard**, from South Shore School (left), **Ryan Bamford**, of Renton Christian School (middle), and **Jeremy Holmes**, home school. Please contact my office for further information on how to participate in the Senate page program next year.



BASIC STATE BUDGET/TAX INFORMATION

- The state has three distinct budgets funded from specific sources, which pay for specific items:
 - The **General Fund** pays for public schools, social services (including public safety and prisons), natural resource management, and environmental protection.
 - The **Capitol Budget** pays for construction, maintenance, and preservation of state buildings and parks.
 - The **Transportation Budget** is strictly for our state's transportation needs.
- The state constitution dictates that all gas tax money must be spent for "highway purposes" only. This includes ferries, State Patrol activities, and the Department of Licensing.
- The Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (MVET) was first adopted in 1937 in lieu of a state property tax. That is why this money goes into the General Fund instead of into the Transportation Budget.
- Washington's gas tax is 23-cents per gallon, ranking 17th highest along with Delaware. Neighboring states — Idaho, Montana, California, and Oregon — have higher gas taxes. Twenty-two other states are considering a gas tax increase this year.

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Prentice
Margarita
Washington State Senator
11th Legislative District
419 John A. Cherberg Bldg.
PO Box 40482
Olympia, WA 98504-0482